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ABSTRACT

Implications of changes in the Hong Kong secondary school curriculum are examined, focusing on the syllabus leading to a new school-leaving examination in English literature. The new curriculum, based on developments in composition theory and practice and departing from the traditional, narrowly-focused syllabus, emphasizes the process of writing and requires student diary-writing and a project. These changes imply more active participation in learning, small-group interaction, and individual work by students. The teacher's role will change from that of information-provider to counselor, supervisor, and facilitator of student work. Guidelines for teachers, currently in development, will emphasize new methods of classroom management to implement the curriculum. It is also suggested that students will have to come to higher education with a new set of study skills and learning strategies. These skills are likely to be in line with the process approach to writing and will also affect the professor's relationship with the student, removing much of the traditional prescriptive role. A 33-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN THE SIXTH FORM: THE POTENTIAL FOR CHANGES IN APPROACHES TO WRITING SKILLS AT TERTIARY LEVEL

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Introduction

Hong Kong is currently undergoing a series of examination and curriculum innovations which could have far-reaching effects on the practice of teaching in upper secondary forms. In 1994 the new series of Advanced Supplementary (A/S) examinations will be introduced. These examinations, designed to provide a broader sixth form curriculum (Grade 12) than the existing narrow one, will be available in a wide range of subjects.

Two major innovations will be the introduction of Liberal Studies and Chinese Language and Culture. Liberal Studies has been introduced in order to broaden the outlook of Hong Kong students. The introduction of Chinese Language and Culture is intended to enable students to appreciate their cultural and linguistic heritage. It is eventually hoped that Liberal Studies, Chinese Language and Culture and the Use of English examinations will become compulsory subjects for all prospective entrants to tertiary education. The Use of English examination is already compulsory for University entrance.

Some view it as unfortunate that a successful rearguard action has been fought by the traditional 'hard' disciplines in the tertiary institutions - those with already overcrowded curricula (Medicine and Engineering). They have managed to convince the authorities to make Liberal Studies and Chinese Language and Culture optional, not compulsory, subjects. Undoubtedly, these attitudes will soften in the next few years.

In this paper the syllabus for the new A/S English Literature option will be considered. The curriculum innovations in this option and the changes in teacher practice which will result from those innovations may have beneficial results for the tertiary institutions which admit the students who take the option.

Composition Theory and Practice

The last decade has seen much discussion and a growing amount of research into the issue of how writers compose text. Early work by Emig (1971), responding to a call by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer (1963) for research into L1 (First Language) writing processes and subsequent work by Perl (1978), Pianko (1979) and Faigley and Witte (1981, 1984) into the composing processes of first language writers revealed that writing is not linear, that it is recursive, and that substantial rewriting and revision takes place. Such pioneering work with first language writers was followed by research into the composing processes of second language writers by researchers such as Chelala (1981), Zamel (1982, 1983), Jones (1982, 1985), Raimes (1985), Brooks (1985), Rorchach (1986), and Martin-Betancourt (1986). Studies involving Chinese writers have been conducted by Lay (1982), Arndt (1987) and Friedlander (1990).

Some of the major findings of this research are that:

- lack of competence comes more from lack of composing competence than from lack of linguistic competence (Jones 1982, Zamel 1982, Raimes 1985)

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- the composing processes of 'unskilled' L2 writers and 'unskilled' L1 writers are similar (Zamel 1983).
- competent L1 writers use common strategies.

Out of this research came changes in the theory and practice of composition teaching to first language writers and, subsequently, to second language writers. In first language writing one can trace the development of the 'process approach' over the past decade (see table below and subsequent text developed from Johns 1990: 25-31).

Table: Process Approaches

EXPRESSIVISTS		COGNITIVISTS
WRITER AS CREATOR	WRITER AS INTERACTANT	SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST VIEW

The 'Expressivists' were characterised by an approach which emphasised the power of the student as writer providing opportunities for the individual and uninhibited expression of honest and personal thought. Journal writing was a typical technique used in this approach which still has powerful adherents (Elbow 1973, 1981a, 1981b).

The 'Cognitivists' are characterised by an approach which treats writing as a problem solving activity. This approach has had a great effect on L2 research, theory and practice. It emphasises the importance of the concepts of THINKING and PROCESS.

'Writer as Creator' -- Flower (1989) and Hayes and Flower (1983) look at the writer as a creator -- one who plans extensively and 'defines the rhetorical problem'. Techniques used include group work in planning and writing, the creation of several drafts, and paper revision at the macro level (not merely 'polishing' text at the syntactic or morphological level but altering it in the areas of ideation, rhetoric and coherence).

Writer as Interactant -- Bakhtin (1973) stressed the need for the writer to interact with the audience. The notion that writing in English should be 'writer responsible' has now become part of current L2 writing theory and practice. 'Writer responsibility' can be defined as the acceptance by the writer that it is his/her responsibility for communicating with the reader; providing clear arguments, demonstrating opinions and their organization; and revealing the form of the text and the content in a manner accessible to the reader.

Social Constructionist View -- This view considers writing as a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience. This approach stresses the importance of using the appropriate genre, knowing who the audience is, and writing for and within a 'discourse community'. This is the most recent trend within the cognitivist view of process in writing and is documented in the work on genre of Swales (1990), Dudley-Evans (1987), Martin (1985) and Berry (1989).

One can see within these developments the rationale for the theories and techniques in teaching L2 composition which have emerged in recent years:

- clear identification of the purpose for the communication
- writer responsibility towards the audience
- awareness of the genre to be used
- a well-signalled rhetorical framework
- an identified audience
- an acceptance of the notion of drafting and revising

It is believed, by advocates of the process approach that these, together with an acceptance of the role of the reader as a genuine source of feedback, help to provide the supportive framework within which students can learn to develop ideas coherently. This approach also reflects the world of academic and business writing where written drafts are created and discussed and rewritten regularly. (Given the above it is sad to see that the questions set in the most recent Composition Paper in the Hong Kong Use of English Examination (Summer 1991) eschew these trends and return to an audienceless, non-formatted, purposeless and artificial batch of questions which has caused concern among many of those involved in the teaching of writing, leading to a number of letters to the press.)

The A/S English Literature Syllabus – Description

The new English Literature A/S curriculum contains many features which distinguish it from traditional syllabuses in this subject. It conforms to the sixth form curriculum guidelines established by the Sixth Form Working Party on Curriculum Development in trying to expose students to a range of ideas in order to broaden their education. Three major curriculum developmental aims were adhered to:

- A full range of student needs should be taken into account - not merely intellectual ones. Social and communicative skills have to be developed so that students may become well-informed people who can enjoy and apply themselves to their future careers with confidence and ability.
- The curriculum and syllabus should be appealing and accessible to both Arts and Science students.
- The syllabus should discourage passive, memorised work and should encourage students to become actively involved in the learning process.

The syllabus does not attempt to provide a narrow focus for detailed literary study of a very few books. Instead it addresses the complementary media of print and film/video in order to expose students to a number of themes so that they can develop their own thinking and opinions rather than having to accept a canon of 'accepted' or 'received' opinion.

The A/S syllabus is divided into two major sections, Part I and Part II. Part II is sub-divided into two further sections:

Part I

Study of two texts and two films with a choice of one of the three following topics: Political and Social Issues, Detective Fiction, and Science Fiction (These three themes have been chosen for the initial curriculum. They will be changed regularly.)

Part II**Section A**

A written diary covering a period of 4 months recording personal reactions, feelings, aspirations in relation to the theme chosen and what the candidate has been reading or viewing or doing.

Section B

A choice of one or two pieces of work out of a choice of three topics, which is/are based on a subject or theme relevant to the chosen topic in Part I.

What is novel for Hong Kong is that although Part I will be examined by written answers to written questions in the traditional manner, Part II consists of a portfolio of work divided into two sections: a diary and a project. This examination format means that there will have to be changes in teacher and student behaviour, changes which could well be beneficial to the tertiary institutions.

Changes to Teacher and Student Behaviour

This section of the paper outlines the changes to teacher and student behaviour which the new syllabus hopes to effect. Modern theories of composition described earlier will have their place in the techniques and strategies which will need to be developed by students and teachers as they deal with the changes inherent in the examination syllabus.

It is worth noting that there is currently a reaction to a wholehearted 'process approach', one which states that product must not be neglected at the expense of process (Davies 1989). However, the reader will note that the writer has taken an unashamedly optimistic approach to the introduction of the new syllabus in the rest of the paper. No apologies are made for this approach.

The section of the new syllabus which will have the greatest effect on teacher and student behaviour is Part II which encourages each student to respond in his/her own way to the theme that has been chosen. It also enables them to relate what they read, watch, encounter and perceive in the world around them to the theme that they are studying.

The fact that each student portfolio, composed of diary and project, will be an individual product means that it must of necessity be different from that of their peers. This has far-reaching implications for the learning styles of students and for the classroom organization and teaching/learning strategies employed by teachers of this subject.

In the first place students will NOT be able to receive a mass of notes which must be learned and regurgitated as classroom exercises and in the examination. Secondly, it will not be possible for students to borrow, plagiarise, or steal the work of students who have matriculated before them because the diary will be an individual record of reactions to contemporary events and how they relate to the theme being pursued. The record must be contemporary for the four months of record-keeping, although teachers will be encouraged to persuade students to keep a diary for a longer period of time than the four months stipulated in the regulations. (This, of course, has implications for the practice of writing.) In addition, students will be pursuing individual projects which will necessitate them working initially in groups and then alone under the SUPERVISION of their teacher, not as a whole group in one classroom.

For the teacher, a lock-step approach to the dissemination of 'knowledge' about the text will no longer suffice in Part II of the syllabus. Teachers will have to become counsellors, supervisors and facilitators who guide the students along their individual paths towards a greater understanding of the theme and its relation to the political/social world around them. Their new role will include the creation of appropriate learning and discovery tasks for students, tasks which will help to guide students to be able to think for themselves and to be analytical and critical. The new role will be perceived both as an exciting challenge and as a potential threat as teachers no longer become the repositories of an accepted canon of knowledge. They will have to become aware that students working on a project will eventually 'know' a lot more about the project than they do. It will be an opportunity for teachers to behave like readers in the non-school world -- when they approach texts, when they (the teachers) are non-knowers. This is quite different from their normal role where they often know what is right and what the students should be writing about even before the text is written.

Guidelines for teachers, being developed at the moment by the Curriculum Development Council/Hong Kong Examinations Authority joint working party, make it clear that students in the sixth form will not be classroom bound all the time during the periods devoted to this subject. Time will be made for them to work in the library on individual projects. They will be expected to carry over from the classroom an awareness of how the theme relates to all that they see, read and do. In addition, time will have to be spent on individual planning, research, drafting and the revision of ongoing work on the project. Teachers will need to become aware of new methods of classroom management in order to implement the new curriculum. Whole group teaching for much of the time will disappear.

These changes augur well for attitudes to learning and study when these students eventually arrive in their chosen institutions.

Implications of These Changes for Tertiary Institutions in Hong Kong

The implications of these changes to teaching and learning styles in the upper forms of those secondary schools in Hong Kong which decide to opt for the A/S level English Literature syllabus could be significant in terms of the quality of student thought and writing which occurs as a result of these developments.

It is possible that students will learn a number of new study skills. They will have to learn how to use the library efficiently, how to use references, how to skim and scan texts in a real situation and not merely in the section of the Use of English textbook used in the language classroom, how to relate what they are doing in class to the world around them, how to acquire new knowledge by fitting it into existing schema, and, most importantly of all:

- how to work on their own on tasks set by and agreed with their teachers
- how to develop their skills in thinking, planning, organising, selecting and learning.

These changes, which could be forced upon students by the most powerful agent for change in Hong Kong -- the examination syllabus -- will be an excellent precursor for the work that students will encounter in the tertiary institutions. Indeed, it may well have spin-off for teaching and learning within the institutions themselves as the expectations of the students are raised.

At the level of writing skills development, the new syllabus has the potential for improving student writing in keeping with the beliefs of a process approach to writing. The sheer amount of writing that students will be encouraged to do could benefit the quality of the writing although Krashen (1984) has sounded a cautionary note that quantity may not guarantee quality. Students will be encouraged to go through the natural 'processes' of writing which were described above. The advocates of a process approach would claim that with the opportunities for extensive planning and research, a macro-structure of the project will be created by the students under the supervision of the teacher. In addition, the potential for increased levels of coherence will be available as students become aware of how the macrostructure affects the 'texture' of the piece where coherence (overall unity of the text), cohesion (connectivity at the sentence and paragraph level), and thematisation (what follows on from the previous sentence) combine together to produce a well-developed, logical piece of writing, where there is every opportunity for thinking about the processes of revision and re-writing in order to improve earlier drafts.

It should be noted, however, that some notes of caution have recently emerged with writers commenting on some of the drawbacks of a fully-fledged process approach (e.g. Zamel (1987) and Moore (1987) quoted in Kelly (1989)).

As described above a major change will occur when the teachers read the diaries and project drafts of the students. These pieces of text will be real texts, not mere examination answers written for a faceless examiner. Teachers will have to act as genuine readers, learning about the ideas that the young writers are creating, developing, organising, connecting and explicating. This is an important point because the students will be in 'control' of their own diaries, not writing to a teacher-conceived task. In addition the teacher will not know what to expect. The teacher will thus much more resemble a reader coming fresh to a text. The teacher will, in effect, be a 'non-knower'.

Prescribed answers will no longer have a place in Part II of the new syllabus. This can be seen as a very welcome trend away from the 'model answers' which abound in Hong Kong's bookshops. The emphasis will be on the individual response of the students. The strategies described by researchers such as Elbow, Raimes, Faigley and Witte and all other adherents of process approaches will be evidenced as students plan, organize, develop ideas, draft and revise in Section B, and where they produce individual responses when they 'own' their own text in Section A.

A Final Cautionary Note

If readers feel that all the above sounds too good to be true, they may well be correct in terms of the numbers of prospective candidates who prepare for the option -- but not in the potential effect of the new curriculum on those students who do decide to opt for the English Literature A/S level.

Those who choose the new syllabus are unlikely to be disappointed, are likely to get a great deal of personal insight out of choosing the option, are likely to be better writers at the end of the process than those who do not have the opportunity to be exposed to the learning that will accompany the option, and will undoubtedly be better prepared for tertiary level studies than many of their peers.

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